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# Assimilation On (Not) Turning White: Memory and the Narration of the Postwar History of Japanese Canadians in Southern Alberta

Aoki, Darren

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## **Assimilation - On (Not) Turning White**

### **Memory and the Narration of the Postwar History of Japanese Canadians in Southern Alberta**

**Darren J. Aoki**

**ABSTRACT:** This essay explores understandings of “race” – specifically, what it means to be Japanese – of *nisei* (“second generation”) individuals who acknowledge their near complete assimilation structurally and normatively into the Canadian mainstream. In historically-contextualized analyses of memory fragments from oral-history interviews conducted between 2011-2017, it focusses on voices and experiences of southern Alberta, an area whose significance to local, national, continental, and trans-Pacific histories of people of Japanese descent is belied by a lack of dedicated scholarly attention. In this light, this essay reveals how the fact of being Japanese in the latter half of the twentieth century was strategically central to *nisei* lives as individuals and in their communities. In imagining a racial hierarchy whose apex they knew they could never share with the *hakujin* (whites), the racial heritage they nevertheless inherited and would bequeath could be so potent as to reverse the direction of the colonial gaze with empowering effects in individual engagements then and as remembered now. We see how the narration and validation of one’s life is the navigation of wider historical contexts, the shaping of the post-colonial legacy of Imperial cultures, as Britain and Japan withdrew from their erstwhile colonial projects in Canada.

## INTRODUCTION

“When we were growing up, and going to school, there were a lot of times I think I wished that I was *hakujin* [white/Caucasian]. I don’t know...mainly because, in some areas,...I don’t know” (Esther 2017).<sup>1</sup> With increasing hesitation, Esther struggled to explain this desire which seemed to contradict her Japanese self so profoundly. Born in 1943 in Coaldale, Alberta shortly after her parents had been “evacuated” from Vancouver as part of the Canadian government’s wartime mass dislocation of its Japanese-Canadian citizens, she is young for a *nisei* (“second generation”; children of Japanese immigrants in the first half of the twentieth century). Although she did not directly experience many of the wartime difficulties which older *nisei* had, the racism which lay at the root of the state’s persecution of the Japanese Canadians resonated ambivalently to shape this memory as a crisis of identity:

I don’t ever really remember being discriminated against. I think a few times I was called a ‘Jap’, but that didn’t happen that often. I think, yes, just your self-confidence, maybe, more so, and I don’t know, I just, sort of, felt inferior.

“Isn’t that crazy?” she concluded, picking up on something she said earlier in her interview, “a complex” she called it (2017). Then she laughed, as if – almost ritualistically – her confession of racial dissonance was now concluded. We continued to discuss racial identity, but that poignant moment had passed when past and present merged and her conversation with me became an interior engagement with her own self.

Esther’s memory alerts us to a remarkable story of fast transformation, one which saw the Japanese Canadians demonized as “enemy aliens” during the Second

World War by the Dominion government, but by century's end, becoming "the most integrated and assimilated group of all ethnic minorities in Canada" (Hickman, Fukawa 2011, 142). It is a story that is now well-known, recorded through quantitative and qualitative analysis as an empirically measurable example of assimilation. Yet, in hinting at psychological or emotional trauma as she articulates her own memories, Esther invites us to consider another, little-appreciated perspective on how we might begin to apprehend "assimilation" not simply as a social process, but a personal history at the very heart of which is what it means to be Japanese.

This essay will explore this perspective in its multiple and contradictory expressions. Privileging the voices of *nisei*, it focusses on how Japanese-ness was defined as a racial experience and remembered as a strategy of every-day survival, coping and resilience, perseverance and achievement. Specifically, it considers how ethnic and cultural difference calibrated a racial hierarchy whose knowingly unattainable apex was occupied by whites, and one which was navigated through various tactics validated at the time of their deployment in the past and/or in their recollection, now, in the present. The first section of this essay critically introduces main concepts and literature that inform this oral history research: the intersection of history and memory in the form of "autobiographical memory;" a historical definition of Japanese race/civilization that helps us to appreciate the enduring post-colonial influence of an otherwise defunct Imperial Japan; the master historical narrative of Japanese-Canadian assimilation that sets a context for exploring the contestation of history which the *nisei* experience suggests; and the discursive power of social-science approaches to assimilation.

The second section introduces and critically explores memory fragments compiled from oral history testimony I collected between 2011 and 2017, complemented by reference to other oral-history archives. The narrators' stories, shared primarily in semi-structured interviews open a critical conversation on how the *nisei* generate/d their own racial identity, which – as we shall see – was far from straight-forward since being Japanese in southern Alberta was in continual and contradictory flux; it negotiated the process of becoming assimilated so that the normative imperative posed by “whiteness” came, for some in the longer term of their remembered lives, to be premised upon their assertion of being Japanese. In this essay, we'll explore four issues shaping this negotiation of assimilation: the racial “othering” of “natives;” the historical, moral, and affective meanings of *hakujin*; the “racial gaze;” and finally, on (not) becoming white.

To 2017, my research engaged fifty-one people in order to begin to record stories that narrate the postwar experience of Japanese Canadians in southern Alberta.<sup>2</sup> Including 27 women and 24 men, all claim this region as their home either now and/or in the past. This geographical focus is pertinent. As Fujiwara (2012) argues in her work on labour relations in early postwar southern Alberta, “Japanese internally displaced persons...in Alberta...[seem] to be outside of ‘mainstream’ Japanese Canadian collective memory” (63). This lack of consciousness might be explained by southern Alberta's diminishing influence as a Japanese centre. By the 1970s when the discursive production of Japanese-Canadian history gained momentum, the Alberta population was only a third of that of either British Columbia and Ontario. Of the nearly 8,000 who lived in what was Canada's third largest grouping by province, the majority were spread between its two metropolitan centres, Calgary and Edmonton, leaving some 3,100 living in and around Lethbridge, southern Alberta's main city

(Kobayashi 1989, 23). Yet, between 1941 and 1947, the province saw its Japanese population grow from over five-hundred to in excess of four-thousand (6).<sup>3</sup>

For this essay, I draw from a number of the testimonies of forty-one individuals who self-identify as *nisei*.<sup>4</sup> The concept of *nisei* is approximate, so much so as to signify difference and divergence. The oldest person I met, born in 1916, reached the age of 100 in the year of our first meeting and the youngest three decades his junior, was born in 1947; the former spoke little English and was closer in values to his *issei*<sup>5</sup> parents, the latter, inter-married, degree educated and professional, was perhaps closer to the typical *sansei*.<sup>6</sup> There are other variations. Consider how any given individual experienced the “Evacuation” which, in fact, should be understood in terms of multiple, highly differing internment/incarceration scenarios and forced displacements. Then, there are the fourteen *nisei* I met for whom the “Evacuation” was not a direct experience. Born and raised in two of Canada’s few settlements of Japanese Canadians outside of British Columbia, they were neither displaced nor dispossessed though restrictions on their rights did apply (Iwaasa 1978).<sup>7</sup>

Finally, there is gender. In the amplification of both women’s and men’s voices, *nisei* approaches to assimilation are variously configured, for example, the association of the private and public spheres of home and work with female and male domains. A note of caution, however. Some of the experiences treated here certainly suggest continuities of historical value which the gendered experience shapes: Sugiman (2016) compellingly argues, for instance, how for women, “family relationships understandably were, and continue to be, important for the transmission of feelings, thoughts, and reflections on the war years” (568). Nevertheless, this essay’s express focus on the decades following the war invites opportunities not only to re-calibrate the narrative possibilities of *nisei* experiences, but re-

evaluate the value with which we seek to understand these. Specifically, the designation of “postwar” is deployed less as a periodizing filter through which the lived and remembered pasts are approached often only as the effects of the war, its legacies of loss, violation, and victimization privileged to explain an eternalized heritage of post-trauma. Rather, it is to begin to emphasize how the lives of *nisei* – visiting past moments when they sometimes looked to the future – might also be narrated in terms of creativity, projection, influence, and empowerment. What possibilities are revealed when we defer from automatically prefixing *nisei* journeys with “re-” – to “re-cover,” “re-build” – and instead, we focus more on covering new ground, building, innovating, and asserting novel identities, gender intersecting with race? Consider that many of the *nisei* women heard here broke the colour barrier to education and employment in the establishment of their working lives. The pasts which such experiences narrate exceed the scope of this essay. But, in interrogating how we might understand the postwar experience both within *and* outside the long shadow of war, gender, age, social background, the past itself, and of course, race can take on unexpected value to narrate Japanese-Canadian history anew.

## **SECTION 1 – MAIN CONCEPTS AND LITERATURE**

### **Autobiographical Memory**

In *The Politics of Racism*, Sunahara (1981) argues that while the “[telling] of stories in their own words” has the advantage of “fleshing out the facts with personal experiences,” the

account nevertheless is “marred by historical inaccuracies due to the frailty of human memory” (2). For us, it is precisely the frailty of human memory which gives *nisei* voices their value in the narration of the Japanese-Canadian postwar historical experience, by which I mean two things: a factual record of the past which in the intent of their narrators faithfully describes transformation over time as lived, shaped, and effected in their everyday lives; and as memory, moments of recollection in the present through which the past as it is re-lived and re-shaped acquires truthful meaning. These two processes – the record and memory – are not automatically in opposition, but in the dissonance they sometimes chime when fact and truth contrast, we start to understand why assimilation and the discourses of race that shape it continue to be contentious. More importantly, we begin to appreciate how the empowering act of narration is imbued with moral urgency, since the narrators are not simply repositories of already existing stories, valuable only insofar as they can accurately record the past. As Josselson (2009) reminds us, “autobiographical memory...is a process of reconstruction rather than a faithful depiction...the present can be viewed as constructing the past and creating an implicit dialogue between the remembered and the remembering self” (647).<sup>8</sup> It also sparks a discourse through which “individual memory” is also “collectivised internally,” or as Eyerman (2004) observes: “The past becomes present through symbolic interactions, through narrative and discourse, with memory itself being a product ‘called upon to legitimate identity, to construct and reconstruct it’” (162). To this end, it may be that as so many of the *nisei* who met with me have entered their twilight years, their interviews sparked a “memory cycle” moment (163), a will to remember one more – maybe last – time, to talk with the purpose of sharing in order to narrate the past – one’s own past as Japanese as well as Japanese Canadians’ past – before it is irrevocably silenced. The opportunity to remember when somebody is listening is an incitement to creativity and of legitimacy and authority (Ndebele 1998, 20). In the engagement now that is the remembrance of their pasts, the *nisei*



generate their histories, lending it the moral weight that is the value of their lives as they reflect on it from the vantage point of from where they have come to where they have arrived.

## **Japanese Race**

This essay's focus on race, which is our cue into how *nisei* understood themselves as Japanese, enables us to identify what was at stake in the latter half of the twentieth century, particularly when it came to assimilation as a mechanism of change. For many of the narrators, Japanese race was discursively powerful if ill-defined, yet it pervasively underscored how they spoke about themselves, their relationships, aspirations, and desires. In its articulation, as we shall see, physiological measures of purity and authenticity rooted in the Japanese homeland were evident. But being Japanese was also a historicising measure of civilization according to which blood origins were a cultural, "primordial or innate essence" (Weiner 2009, 4), something akin to the concept of *minzoku*. Translated as a conflation of "race" and the "Japanese nation," Weiner in his study of the construction of Japanese "race" observes how the meaning of *minzoku* pivots according to a binary construction: "the notion of a civilized Japan presumed its opposite, the existence of which provided both a measure by which Japanese accomplishments could be judged" (8). Along these lines, race and a self-sense of pecking-order placement is defined by *nisei* in transaction and encounter with others.

Japanese race is also an invention, imported to Canada by the *issei* from a modernising Japan constructing its own national identity in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, then configured in the trans-Pacific engagement/clash of Britain's and

Japan's North American colonial projections, and finally asserted in ways that took advantage of Canada's post-colonial self-stylization from white Dominion to sovereign multi-cultural state. As this essay observes, it is the self-assertion and affirmation of Japanese race – transmitted from *issei* parents to their children<sup>9</sup> – which is central to *nisei*'s reflections on their postwar transformation. From this perspective, the dissolution of Imperial Japan's colonial projects in the America's nevertheless extended a post-colonial influence, one that is made audible in many of my narrators' easy self-designation as Japanese. We'll hear it frequently below.

However, "Japanese" is not exactly interchangeable with "Japanese Canadian." In isolating the "Japanese" out of the more standard historical designation of "Japanese Canadian," my narrators can be understood to exploit the post-colonial ambiguity of their Japanese inheritance. It may be that as Kobayashi and Fuji Johnson (2007) observe of "processes of 'racialization'" that "the racialized body [of Japanese] is constantly marked and its meaning reinforced" (4) in the self-assertion of one's own Japanese-ness. But the act of avowing one's race is also historical: at the moment of its utterance and in reflection, this declaration points out the Japanese-Canadian equation to be, as Roy Miki observes (2005), "not stable and constant but rather quite 'slippery' in the various significations invoked on its behalf" (14). In this sense, both as lived experience and as memory, assimilation potentially becomes something other than a zero-sum equation in which Japanese-ness is exchanged for or lost in inverse correlation to the acquisition of Canadian-ness, which in the lens of critical race studies "means white" (Paragg 2015, 21): more on "white-ness" below.

### **The Postwar Narrative of Japanese Canadian Assimilation**

Defined as “the process of absorbing people into a larger group, especially of having a minority cultural group take on the characteristics of the majority group” (Sedai), assimilation seems to be historically epitomized by the Japanese Canadians. From even before the commencement of the Second World War, *nisei* navigated their dual identities as Japanese and Canadian by re-shaping and even rejecting the former in order to become wholly the latter “in action, appearance, and outlook” as Camelon (1994, 18) observes of female *nisei* contributors to *The New Canadian*, the long-standing English-Japanese newspaper. The personal costs could be high: parental disapproval; community ostracization; and rejection by mainstream society whose racism went unabated even as war passed. Nonetheless, given the extent and scope of their victimization during their seven-year Second World War,<sup>10</sup> it is ironic that once their official designation as an “unassimilable bloc or colony” was rescinded, they became so desirable as to effect a demographic sea-change: sometime between the 1960s and 1970s, the number of Japanese Canadians entering into mixed marriages accelerated to such an extent as to become demographically anomalous (Hirabayashi 1976, 31-34). At the beginning of the twenty-first century, three-quarters of all couples “where at least one person...was Japanese” entered into “mixed unions;” the national average was one-quarter. It seemed to some observers that the Japanese Canadians had become “the most...assimilated group of all the ethnic minorities in Canada” (Hickman, Fukawa 2011, 142). That’s not all, since they also became exceedingly middle class. Their educational achievement, economic advancement, social status, lack of social deviance, and acculturation of Anglo-white tastes and manners seemed so complete that they were “out-whiting the whites” (Hirabayashi 1976, 31). “We are per capita among the country’s most

highly paid, educated, and assimilated,” said Maryka Omatsu, Canada’s first female judge of East Asian descent, an “ethnic success story” (2013).

### **Assimilation Scholarship**

The speed and completeness of Japanese-Canadian assimilation has understandably invited social-scientific enquiry, a phenomenon mirrored in the postwar situation of Japanese Americans who were also systematically incarcerated during the war. As early as 1955, Japanese-American acculturation – a necessary condition for ethnic assimilation – had been so rapid as to be judged “an achievement perhaps rarely equalled in the history of human migration” (Broom, Kituse 1955, 45). Two decades later, Adachi (1976) whose *The Enemy That Never Was* became the seminal history of the Japanese Canadians, commented that this assessment could be applied to *nisei* in Canada (355-356). Around the same time, American-born sociologist Hirabayashi, influential leader in the revitalization of the National Japanese Canadian Citizen’s Association (Sasaki 2003), similarly cited traditional Japanese values to explain the *nisei*’s entrance into the middle class, its “comfortable urban, English-speaking and western cultural environment” acting as a “foundation” for their *sansei* children to assimilate fully, quantitatively could be observed in the dramatic surge of inter-marriages from the 1960s and 1970s onwards (Hirabayashi 1976). Over the course of the next two decades, sociologist Makabe (1980, 1998) corroborated Hirabayashi’s findings through her extensive qualitative research. She similarly observed that the *nisei*’s “strong subconscious determination was realized to become fully integrated and assimilated into the Anglo-Canadian society” (1980, 124).

Adachi's, Hirabayashi's, and Makabe's conclusions are discursively powerful in the generation of the postwar narrative of Japanese-Canadian assimilation as they draw authority off of and support dominant theories of "structural assimilation."<sup>11</sup> In the case of Makabe especially, the trajectory she observes of assimilation as a zero-sum process both within and across generations is not simply social and historical. It is also moral. Accordingly, Japanese as an ethnic identity, community of interaction and affiliation, and cultural value are lost as an individual becomes acculturated into and socialized increasingly as a Canadian.

Assimilation is an efficacious transformation according to which Japanese-ness sits in inverse correlation to the white Canadian mainstream. Far from being historically contingent, then, it is inevitable. Reflecting on the ultimate implications of Japanese-Canadian assimilation, Makabe contemplates the moment when – in her judgement – intermarriage defines the "dream becom[ing] reality for a visible minority" (2005). Precisely because assimilation is an empirically observable reality regardless of what historical contingencies may have shaped it and skirting messy post-colonial issues of identity, she seems to suggest that the ultimate disappearance of the Japanese – in spite of or because of their wartime treatment – is normative: "the Japanese Canadians' distinctive ethnic identity may fade away like a 'sinking ship,'" she posits; "So what! Does it really matter? What does it matter if a small group of Japanese Canadians assimilates and disappears before too long?" (121, 125). It is precisely this question which the voices of southern-Alberta *nisei* defiantly answer.

## **SECTION 2 – THE VOICES OF SOUTHERN ALBERTA'S NISEI**

## **Racial “Othering”**

At one level, the historical narrative of assimilation, especially as observed by Makabe and others concurs with Japanese Canadians’ own understanding of their history. Consider, for instance, how Nish<sup>12</sup> (2016) – born in 1936 and “evacuated” to Alberta where he became a leading figure in Alberta’s land surveying industry as a civil engineer – described *nisei* ambitions: “I think in our generation really, [we] really wanted to assimilate into the community”

you wanted to show that you could do as good as anybody else or better and that was sort of inbred into you and so I think that’s one of the things that maybe, you know being evacuated and the decision to stay here rather than go back to the coast was the fact that, you know, we can make it out here.

The alignment of personal striving with historical circumstances to affirm a Japanese work ethic is both a common-sense explanation of Japanese achievement, as well as a common theme in scholarship on the structural assimilation of *nisei* across North America. For example, as far back as the late 1970s, Makabe’s structuralist study of *nisei* in Toronto observed high educational achievement matched by rising occupational mobility; their entry into the middle class was shaped by values of hard work, concerns over security and success, and a need to prove themselves (Makabe 1998, 49, 58). Yet, there is another question that should be emphasized in Nish’s assertion “[to] do as good as anybody else *or better*,” namely, better than whom? In fact, as we’ll see when we encounter Nish again, the answer is

complex and contradictory, in part because his narration of his own history and the wider story of assimilation changed through our interview engagement.

For the moment, let's explore how understandings of being Japanese are deployed as a historical narrative through an appeal to racial difference. Consider the following anecdote from Dick<sup>13</sup> (2011), founder and owner of one of southern Alberta's most enduring and successful potato farms. In his characteristic straight-talking manner, he reflected on the wartime treatment of the Japanese, "The rebellious guys [now], who were they?"

We'd just be like the Chileans or whoever. Get over here, and the first time something happens in their country, they protest at the Canadian Embassy. But Japanese were never like that...My dad never ever did say the evacuation was, it was a bad thing. He never said it was really bad. He just said in Japanese *shō ga nai*, which means like, 'crap happens and [you] gotta get on in your life, keep working and you'll make it back.' That was his understanding and he instilled that into us kids.

To validate the life trajectory which Dick's family across generations has followed, note the strategic comparison made with a recent group of immigrants: on the one hand, Japanese stoicism – hence, their implicit loyalty to the Canadian state – and the lack of restraint – therefore, lack of commitment – shown by the supposed Chileans on the other. This is not simply an affirmation of ethical superiority. Rather, the assertion deploys a tactic of appealing to cultural values – *shō ga nai* – which configures the "othering" assertion as a racialized one.<sup>14</sup>

“In the beginning, [the Japanese] were treated very much like the Native Indians” explained a descendant of one of the first Japanese families to settle in southern Alberta in the first decade of the twentieth century (Yasuko, 2013).<sup>15</sup> Underscoring the importance of these early settlers to the development of the sugar beet industry, she continued, “and then [the white community] found out later that the Japanese were trustworthy, honest, hard workers. So they changed their mind...” (2013). Another woman (Teresa 2011)<sup>16</sup> explained of her arrival in southern Alberta as an “evacuee” at the age of fifteen over three decades later: “At first, they treated us like Native people, because they never had Japanese in the community, so we, I guess we looked closest in resemblance to the Native people.” In almost identical fashion, she too emphasized how Japanese quickly distinguished themselves: “they [the white community] soon found out, that we did not act that way, and so they learned to take us as we are.”

These are complicated statements. On the one hand, the disparaging characterization of “natives” was not stated in a way that was meant to be offensive; indeed, that these sentiments might be construed as racially discriminatory is suggested in their hesitant and hushed manner. Such views were understood to be potentially controversial. Nevertheless, in an oral history interview from 1973, Katzuo (*sic* Kazuo) Iwaasa ruefully observed, “The Japanese attitude bears this out today... They’ve become very middle class in their outlook.” Himself a descendant of one of the early twentieth-century Alberta settlers, he underscores an imperative sense of injustice:



I don't see them engaged in political activity, I don't see them speaking out where there are injustices, and in many cases, say in southern Alberta, [they] ...become...owners and operators of beet farms themselves are in a position to exploit other minorities such as the, natives and *metis* people, and it would appear that some of them have not even learned the basic lesson from what they underwent.

The irony of people once victimized now victimizing is all the more powerful because, when explored historically, two worldviews can be seen to collide with explosive force of feeling. Traced back to Meiji-era (1868-1912) modernization, Japanese attempts to project themselves as an imperial power subscribed to, as Oguma (2002) described it, “the discourse of the day [which] contrasted the ‘West’ (synonymous with ‘white,’ ‘civilised,’ and ‘rulers’) with the ‘East’ (synonymous with ‘coloured,’ ‘barbaric’, and ‘ruled’)” (331). Caught between the two poles, Japan may have said “Good-bye to Asia” (*datsu-A, nyū-Ō*; Fukuzawa 1997, 186), but Oguma rightly observes the powerful ambiguity which was generated, one that rendered equality approximate since being “close to the ‘West’” is a proximate position (2002, 331-332), always requiring a shoring up of one's civilized status through distance from as well as power over non-whites, the “barbarians” or, in the home-grown early twentieth-century – late Meiji- to Taishō-era – lingo of Japanese Canadians, *saibashi*, an “opprobrious term for ‘Indian’,” whose transliterative genealogy includes the French-Canadian *sauvage* or “savages” for “natives” (Hancock 1969, 231-232).

Racial “othering” by Japanese to establish hierarchical value was not unique to Canada. In the United States which saw assimilation take the form of *beika*

(“Americanization”), Brookes (2000) observes of Chicago that for Japanese who migrated eastward, “not being white did not mean being black,” they occupied “a position lacking easy definition” (1656).<sup>17</sup> This “in-between position” enabled Japanese Americans to “separate themselves from black Chicagoans” and in the process, they “gravitated toward the white world,” and began to partake of the “economic and educational opportunities, residential mobility, and political power that blacks could only dream of” (1656-1657). Like African Americans who “occupied the bottom of the city’s racial ladder,” southern Alberta’s Indigenous population were similarly positioned. For the Japanese as both colonized and – *vis-à-vis* the “natives” in Canada or blacks south of the border – colonizers, a “productive ambivalence of the object of colonial discourse” emerged as Bhabha (1994, 96) might identify it: specifically, the “native” situation could at once be a point of empathy – how odious was/is our/their treatment<sup>18</sup> – *and* distance – how far we have come in contrast to them. In a closely-considered rumination on multi-culturalism, Hiro<sup>19</sup> – himself an “evacuee” who came to Alberta at the age of seven – reflected on the suffering caused by systematic state violence:<sup>20</sup> “You know, probably the only racial group that gets discriminated against significantly is the natives” (Hiro 2011).

If, for some, the social position and moral worth of Japanese was elevated in the racial hierarchy through the judged inferiority of other groups, the question emerges of what an ever-higher approach to the apex implied in this hierarchy. Scholars of the Japanese-American experience have deployed the concept of “whiteness” in critical ways. For Azuma (2016), history itself was white-washed: he argues that for each succeeding wave of migrants coming to America, the “European settler-colonists in deeds and dispositions” was not only positioned as an archetypal moral model for a “sanitized collective self-identity;” rather, the myth of poor and tired masses huddling, the wretched homeless making America home to

breathe free, cast the master narrative of America itself as an “immigrant search for whiteness”. For Japanese born in the United States, and within the postwar liberal imaginary, they “claim[ed]...honorary whiteness” (266).

Okihiro (2000) takes a different tack. Emphasising the Orientalist impulse driving European imperialism (America is less a result of this colonialism than an agent of it), he cites Crèvecoeur – “individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men” – to remind us that the “melting pot” is less a melange of merging parts. Rather, it moulds those parts to fit into and support western predominance: “Asians, it must be remembered did not come to conquer and colonize America; Americans went to conquer and colonize Asia.” The “generative/transformational” moment of “when and where I [Okihiro himself, and Asians more broadly] enter...the American community,” he subtly notes, is already a colonized moment, one in which whiteness is already the structure of the mind which must be overcome (133-134, 145-146). It is the battle against the discursive and affective power of whiteness which Omi (2016) observes, when he argues, “Given the pervasive system of white supremacy that Asian Americans have historically grappled with, claims for extended rights and privileges were framed in constant reference to whiteness” (43). It is a fraught position, since the weapons to fight against this oppression also form the object of desire: “to be defined as white or “near white” is an historically contextualized “Asian American aspiration” (43).

### **Hakujin**

## *Colonial Impulses*

“The search for whiteness,” “to be defined as white:” what do these mean? While Azuma, Okihiro, and Omi help us to understand the discursive formation of “whiteness” as historically and ideologically colonial, let’s turn our attention to how individuals’ memories of their everyday experience shaped – in the southern Albertan and Canadian context – their definitions of “whiteness” by focussing on the word *hakujin*. Literally meaning “white person” or Caucasian, it could be used neutrally as an adjective, for example, a *hakujin* band (a music group made up of all Caucasians; Hank, Yasuko 2013).<sup>21</sup> In fact, however, its appearance as the one and *only* Japanese-language word to appear near ubiquitously across my interviews suggests a far greater significance. No other Japanese term was invoked so frequently, and across themes: it arose at any moment without prompting. Particularly curious is the fact that, with the exception of three narrators who use Japanese as their main language of communication with their spouses, all others conduct their public and private-sphere daily lives in English: in other words, their bilingual ability, for example, to speak with their parents or other *issei*, has given way to largely monolingual communication in everyday life.<sup>22</sup> Crucially, the frequency with which *hakujin* appeared and the way it was used as a concept may signpost a wider discursive network of shared meaning and value. As an indicator of this, an assumption seems to have been made by the narrators: knowing that I come from the southern Alberta Japanese community, and in contrast to other Japanese words they deployed – for example, *shō ga nai* – a translation for *hakujin* was rarely offered.

## *Colonial Impulses*

For many of the narrators, the first significant encounter with a *hakujin* was animated by a colonial impulse, one often reinforced by the authority of adult over child. Consider Mary (2016),<sup>23</sup> born in 1935, incarcerated in the Tashme “ghost town” internment camp in the early years of the Second World War, then forced eastward to the sugar beet farms of Alberta followed by deportation – as a Canadian-born citizen – to Japan in 1946.<sup>24</sup> Pointing to her photos, she introduced me to her teenage years: “these are all *hakujin*,...they are all Picture Butte people. *Kore mo* [this one, too].” Amongst these was a picture of Mr. and Mrs. Jacob Smith,<sup>25</sup> who – for Mary and her younger sister – became surrogate guardians. Recently returned to Canada in 1950, the two girls of 15 and 13 respectively were not only introduced by the Smith’s to the Nazarene Church where they were converted to Christianity, but they were given new and lasting Anglicized identities because, as Mary recalled Mrs. Smith’s words, “you know girls, it’s hard to say your name in Japanese so I’m going to give you a name.” To Michiko, “I’m going to name you, Mary.” And, to her sister Fumiko, “I’m going to name [you], Faith.”

Importantly, Mary’s memories of the Smith’s were described with warmth; they conveyed appreciation not just for the concern they showed her and her sister, but at the decent treatment of her aunt and uncle who they had hired as “evacuee” sugar beet workers. While this warmth is characteristic of a big-hearted personality, it nonetheless highlights Mary’s active negotiation of a profoundly felt ambivalence. On the one hand, the presumption of colonial authority and the assertion of power on the part of the Smith’s to “whitewash” Mary’s and her sister’s sense of racial self – to erase that most individual of Japanese markers, one’s Japanese name – was an act of cultural violence. Its implications were not lost on Mary: “and, then I thought, ‘Faith!?’...It’s hard for Japanese *issei*<sup>[26]</sup> to say.”

In replacing their names, Japanese inter-generational bonds of female community were undermined, "...they can't say 'th,' especially the women."

Yet, as Mary continually stressed, the Smith's intentions were good and sincere, which alerts us to how the colonial impulse – the white mission to improve, defend even, and civilize colonial subjects – might serve the Japanese in positive ways. A case in point is Dr. Hedwig Bartling (1907-1993) or "Bartie." Maintaining a lifelong commitment to defending the "Canadians of Japanese origin" (Geppo 2008), the United Church missionary influenced the lives of numerous young Japanese at war's end. For example, she advocated in highly public ways – in *The Lethbridge Herald*, at City Hall, on local radio – for Amy Kurio to be admitted to Lethbridge's Galt School of Nursing and become its first Japanese graduate in 1947 (Kurio 2001). There were, in fact, numerous such "allies" who collaborated with the Japanese individually and as a community against the injustices they had suffered. For this discussion, however, I'd like to suggest that attitudes towards these significant *hakujin* relationships are highly potent, not simply because the positive-ness of the recollection may convey a certain generosity of character – open-heartedness, gratitude, forgiveness possibly. Rather, this mode of remembering narrates a longer-term strategic approach to everyday life across the postwar decades, in which the exertion of *hakujin* colonial power over them could be navigated and morally deflated.

*Creating History Through the Tactics of Forgetting*

It is easy to under-estimate the gravity of what Mary was saying, not least because her story was interspersed with more light-hearted observations, “‘Faith!’ That sounds kind of old [-fashioned],” she said as she laughed (2016). Yet, as with all the examples above, while some – like Mary – described relationships they and/or their parents had with their southern-Albertan farm employers in generally positive terms, the reverse was not the case: very few chose to share memories of difficult encounters or longer-term acrimony. Tension, resentment and conflict surely did exist. As Sunahara (1981, 77-86), Roy (2007), and more recently Fujiwara (2007; 2012) have demonstrated, southern-Alberta sugar-beet growers begrudgingly accepted Japanese “evacuees” as labour, this despite the fact that they were absolutely necessary to the continued survival of this industry: Japanese were responsible for the production of as much as two-thirds of the 30,000 acres of the area’s sugar-beet crops (*Lethbridge Herald* 1946, 4). For their part, the 3,000 Japanese who supplied sugar-beet farms with labour, “gradually developed the tendency” as Fujiwara (2012) observes, “to view their employers and the Alberta Sugar Beet Growers’ Association...as oppressors” (64, 65).

That this conflict remained largely unvoiced by my narrators may be explained in part by age. The fact that some were children or in their early youth at the time of the “Evacuation” suggests that memories have faded, while some may be non-existent since problems between adults were not always replicated amongst children: “see, this is Kaz with [a] *hakujin* friend,” said Judy, a *nisei* born in 1939 pointing to a photograph of her husband – two years her elder – with another Japanese youth and a Caucasian lad taken after the war had ended. She added that “it was just as common to have non-Japanese friends as Japanese friends” (Kaz, Elizabeth, Judy, Satch, 2011).<sup>27</sup> Born as a member of one of southern Alberta’s first Japanese communities whose origins at the beginning of the twentieth century made it one of the province’s pioneer groups, Kaz’s Okinawan background helps to explain

his mixed cohort of friendships. His parents' peripatetic working life was common for Okinawan families who moved around the region supplying farm labour, and which saw children enter local schools mixing with Okinawans, Japanese, and non-Japanese alike (2011).

There is another reason that explains the generally positive appraisal that seemed to characterize the narrators' memories of inter-racial relationships, or at least what they chose to share of these. Consider the following example from an interview conducted in the 1970s as part of the Glenbow Museum's oral history collection on ethnic identity in southern Alberta. "He was a good man" recalled Mrs. Ohama as she and her husband, Tona, described Mr. Bennett whose farm he and his wife worked on from 1942 to 1948 as "evacuees" (Ohama, Tona and Mrs. Ohama 1973). In this part of the interview, their stories noticeably diverged:

Mrs. Ohama: "he believed in religion, no smoking, no drinking, you know..."

Mr. Ohama: "He was an athlete...Johnny was a well-built man and a very health-conscious man, nice complexion...big, tall, just like a movie star.

The warmth of feeling here was palpable in the recording. In that moment when their stories are heard to overlap almost competing, an image of a man very special ceased being a memory; he seemed to live, a paragon of moral rectitude on the one hand in Mrs. Ohama's recollections, an embodiment of physical masculinity in Mr. Ohama's. Together, these set an emotional context which helps to explain anecdotes about sharing and trust with the Bennetts – preparing potato seedlings which they all planted together – not to mention later business



dealings, a “gentleman’s agreement” offered by John E. Bennett to Mr. Ohama to work around provincial regulations restricting the rental of land to Japanese in order to start a potato-growing business (1973).

To be certain, the displacement, dispossessions and derogations which Japanese Canadians suffered were explained by some I spoke with in terms of – as we encountered with Sunahara’s work above – a “politics of racism.” Yet, the stories which many of the narrators shared remind of us of the absolute necessity to observe that the juggernaut-like forces of history which effected individuals’ victimization were not an ever-lasting moment, even as traumas may have had lasting effects as scholars like Sugiman (2004, 2009) and Oikawa (2012) have compellingly explored through oral history. In this way, some of my own narrators also narrated a version of the postwar to emphasize how the decades after the Second World War are experienced through unsettling irruptions of post-trauma, pain and loss stretching on as the long and lasting shadow of that war.

Yet, in coming to regard as neighbours – at least in public statement – former farm bosses and others whose demand for labour instrumentalized their displacement and, in turn, the destruction of their former lives, the transformation we witness is perhaps less of these erstwhile agents of the “Evacuation.” Eschewing eternal victimhood through the examples of living that they recounted, the narrators entered into engagements each and every day which could and did spark relationships, everyday inter-racial alliances whose intimacy endured to galvanize life-long friendships, and whose assistance helped individuals to aspire to succeed, imagining the extent of one’s own capabilities while building projects and enterprises that shaped the wider community. This was not always fast nor easy even though, as in other “Evacuation” sites – for example, the British Columbian interior, especially Kelowna if not

Kaslo (Roy 1990) – there transpired an almost abrupt sea-change in anti-Japanese antipathy. The Kelowna *Courier*, as Roy observed, proclaimed in 1949 ““our efforts turned to living in peace and harmony”” (38). A month earlier *The Lethbridge Herald* (1949) had already begun to close that period when civil society was near-shattered by the reverberations of Lethbridge’s racist anti-Japanese discrimination: “they have seen a brighter future for themselves in Southern Alberta than they could ever expect of the West coast” (4). The rhetoric was self-trumpeting, but in observing that “the experience with Japanese evacuees in Southern Alberta would suggest that they are being successfully re-established, largely through their own efforts” (4), the editorial alerts us to a trajectory into the future that is as historical in the short-to-medium term transformation of communities – Japanese and, in turn, southern Alberta – as it is moral in its affirmation of *nisei* becoming.

If the consciousness of subservience enforced on the Japanese comes across as mitigated in Mary’s and many others’ stories, perhaps – as Mr. and Mrs. Ohama and many of the narrators demonstrate – it is because they also wanted to remember what for them were the good people in their lives and the good things they did. Herein may be found a profound self-affirmation. In their recollections of a world which was shaped through judgements *they* made – assigning value to and sometimes withholding it on *hakujin* others – they may have been selective and sometimes sentimental, tactics possibly to forget and protect in a strategy to bleach the stain of shame profoundly felt, to mollify the injuries which state violence and racism every day inflicted. But, there is another truth. This world of positive relations of inter-race isn’t a figment or deferral of their memories; it came into being because the Japanese themselves re-shaped the *hakujin* mainstream, really expanding the imagination of who could and should be part of this. This was less an ideologically-driven idea or politically-

informed discussion than it was quotidian engagements entered into, a process of near imperceptible change that generated deep historical consciousness.

### *Assimilation – Turning Japanese*

Let's return to Nish. Putting special effort into preparing for our interview, he was keen to speak to a number of issues. One of these was, in common with many narrators, to describe how with the exception of some minor verbal abuse in school, he didn't experience racial discrimination, physical or institutional, throughout his life either in his early years, or during his career. Yet, he explained that as he collected his thoughts and wrote these into notes, a moment of awareness was sparked. "I kept saying that I never really experienced any discrimination, not even in my social life" he said of his professional training at Calgary Tech and then the University of Alberta in the 1950s.

But, when I think about it, all our socialising was with the Japanese group, every weekend we went to a party but it was all Japanese...I never really socialized with any *hakujin* groups or other fellow classmates, so when I say that I didn't experience any racial discrimination,...I guess maybe that's one of the reasons why I never felt that I had any racial discrimination but it was sort of an interesting period, it was a very enjoyable period for me to attend university.  
(Nish 2016)

When Nish completed his education, things began to change. “It was only after I started working that I started to get really involved with the community both from a professional and community level, and that’s where I started to get a lot of non-Japanese friends.” Indeed, his professional network of colleagues crossed over into a social one of philanthropic service- and social-club memberships: the Kinsmen, Chinook Club, Gyro Club, and Lethbridge Country Club. “We did a few parties and we had family outings...my family grew up going to these various field trips through the province and across the States so I established some lifelong friends” (2016).

Surrounded daily by non-Japanese – as the first Japanese in the industry – and increasingly in hours after work through the multitude of social contacts to which his role introduced him, it may seem unremarkable that his friendships evolved to include non-Japanese. Yet, in the recollection of how his circle of friendships emerged, something of a revelation occurred. Firstly, there was a shift in historical awareness from one which assumed a largely unchanging circumstance – a life generally free of racial discrimination – to one which was forced to account for change: his life at one time was effectively circumscribed by racial self-segregation. His definition of racial discrimination also transformed from being more about individual acts of abuse and prejudicial attitudes of individuals and institutions to something vague, an internalized assumption of difference held as much by *hakujin* perpetrators as its targets, the Japanese who themselves – as Nish came to realize – subscribed to these same racial boundaries with hardly an interrogating notice of their existence.

That is not all. In the moment that he realized his history had at least two parts pivoting on mono-racial and inter-racial, his story cleaved across his life: he had now to

account for a logic of dual experiences, not automatically in conflict, but racialized all the same. On the one hand, he and his wife maintained strong personal and civic ties with other Japanese through his membership in the Young Buddhist Association in the 1950s followed by his active engagement in the Lethbridge North Buddhist Church. On the other hand, there are his “close friends,...pretty much all Caucasians or non-Japanese,” who emerged initially from his work relationships, extended through his active professional network of philanthropic service clubs, and all the while, deepened into companionships not only for himself, but his wife and children.

At one level, it can be argued that Nish’s narration of his network of friends is premised upon a self-affirmation of near-complete structural and cultural assimilation into the mainstream. The realization of historical change doesn’t fundamentally change this, since where once assimilation was corroborated by an undifferentiated lack of discrimination, it was now a process in which degrees of assimilation from isolation to integration hatch-marked a yardstick against which Nish recollected, articulated, and ultimately measured and valued his social life. In sociological terms, Nish’s story concurs with recent scholarship exploring inter-racial friendships and assimilation. For example, in their quantitative study of migrant assimilation in Germany, Facchini, Patacchini, and Steinhardt (2015) found that “both first- and second-generation immigrants with German friends appear to be more similar to natives than immigrants without German friends,” leading them to conclude that “having a well-developed, native-including social network in the destination country might be an important driver of cultural assimilation” (635). To explain factors promoting the formation of inter-racial relationships, they highlighted a direct correlation with a number of factors, ones that were not only mentioned in Nish’s interview, but which were presented by him as foundational points which, together, charted the moral trajectory of his life: educational

attainment; entrance into employment; social activity and civic concerns; the presence of children who present opportunities for inter-racial adult engagement; and relocation decisions.

In citing Facchini, *et. al.* here, I do not suggest that migration to Germany can be seen as historically akin to the Japanese-Canadian experience. However, in their multi-variable analysis, this research makes an important intervention. Rather than approaching assimilation as a “mostly one-way, absorptive process,” it considers “the extent to which receiving societies are willing to engage with immigrants...and provide them with equal rights and opportunities to express their behaviors and preferences along with the native-born” (619-620). The push-pull dynamic that Facchini, *et. al.* describes obliges us to consider the possibility that, insofar as assimilation involves becoming “similar to natives” and being acknowledged as such by the “natives,” inter-racial perspectives are themselves mutually transformative. Importantly, as Nish’s self-reflections demonstrate, this transformation is not something that simply happens; it can be shaped strategically because one has come to understand the values at stake in the inter-racial configuration. Speaking of that moniker of racial-cultural identity, one’s own name, he explained of his entrance into land surveying: “because you’re Japanese, you’re unique in the industry and people remember you” (Nish 2016). It is for this reason that he never adopted a non-Japanese name nor Anglicized the one he had. Critically, then, this deployment of Japanese-ness to project himself into his profession and the wider male public sphere, not only helped to facilitate assimilation, it was central to it.

## **Imperial Japanese Gazes**

And, so it was for many of the narrators, for whom *hakujin* as a discursive concept was of strategic importance when shaping the wider culture and society. According to Makabe (1998), *hakujin* for Japanese Canadians: “in meaning and use, refers to non-Japanese, to distinguish them from Japanese” (201). Although she does not explore the implications of this definition, a critical opportunity is nonetheless presented to expand upon the relational logic which, in defining *hakujin*, becomes a filter that ubiquitously colours the world. Consider the following conversation on childhood food memories in the early postwar period which Judy – encountered above – had with her younger sister Satch, brother Kaz, and his wife, Elizabeth (2011). “Well, mother would bake bread, those huge loaves of bread in that black pan” recalled Judy in a conversation about childhood food memories. “We’d come home from school and there’d be hot bread. It was delicious.” “...with jam” chimed in Kaz; “and donuts” said Satch, almost singing. But in that moment, the harmony broke and something foreign seeped into the collective memory:

Satch: “I don’t know where they learnt to make...”

Judy: “I don’t know where she learned. I think Grandma Ōshiro...she might have taught mom something?”

Satch: “she was pretty good at cooking.”

Judy: “Mom used to talk about...Mrs. Matson, or Munson;...this *hakujin* lady would teach them ABCs, and she might have been a Christian minister, a

missionary-type person. Because mom could sing ‘Jesus loves me’ from beginning to end. And she’d sing that quite often; she’d sing ‘Jesus loves me.’ [laughs]. So this lady taught them...”

Finishing Judy’s thought, Satch added, “...*hakujin* things,.”

I’ve excerpted this exchange at length because in illustrating how the lens of race and culture coloured the conversation, we can see how the mundane and material mapped the everyday world in racially invested and gendered ways. *Hakujin* – which here is premised as the “other” to Japanese – is a moral category that ordered memories according to an affective binary logic of foreign and familiar. The novelty of that which *hakujin* introduced was ambiguous, incongruously funny/strange, possibly threatening for the forcible conversion it implied; all this white stuff was in contrast to the safety of home and family, mother and grandmother, the Japanese and Okinawan. Indeed, the conversation then turned to listing Japanese foods, which without any hesitation, all could be traced to Grandma Ōshiro.

The binary logic of white/Japanese is potent not simply for the sentiments it might move, it activates a powerful “external racial gaze.” In her study of mixed-race identities in contemporary Canada, Paragg (2015) explains, “the external racial gaze imposes fixed racial categories onto people who belong to racialized groups. Reading people through ‘the act of looking’ exerts power over the one who is ‘looked upon’ and named” (26) – quite literally: from Michiko to Mary and Fumiko to Faith in the eyes of Mrs. Smith; to be taught the ABCs by Mrs. Matson so that you can know that the Bible tells you that Jesus loves you, always *looking* after you (Warner, McQuire 1860). This “white gaze” (Perkins 2005) is a “penetrating colonial gaze” (Mawani 2000, 9).<sup>28</sup>



Yet, that is not the whole story, since in a disarmingly matter-of-fact way, Mary, Nish, Judy, Satch, Kaz, and Elizabeth recognized that they were being looked at. This recognition is potent not because it deflected this projection of white power; far from it since they had – as Perkins (2005) observes of the empowered “modern mulatta” experience in Australia – “come to terms with what is now famously known as ‘the white gaze’” (13). “None was alienated from white culture” she continues, because the mixed-race women she spoke with “derived a certain strength from dealing with the [mulatta] stereotype... They found it necessary to understand the historical processes of exoticization in order to fashion a self at peace with society” (13). So, too, for some of my Japanese narrators, who straddled the white/non-white Canadian divide, a boundary whose postwar blurring could see cultural positioning and racial positions historicized, played against, and flipped, the complicated racialization of Canadian-ness (Paragg 2015).

Knowingly being the subject of the “external racial gaze” opened opportunities to put oneself on display, and in the process, embrace and direct that gaze. “There’s lot of drinking going on, a real Okinawan-style celebration” explained Danny<sup>29</sup> (2011) of the new year parties he hosted at his home, “it was quite the thing, we used to take the *hakujin* co-workers with us, you know, they were really impressed the way we thing. They said “I never met a more...’.” Abruptly turning to reminisce about drinking stories, the opportunity slipped to ask him to finish his sentence. Nonetheless, it seemed clear from his tone that a compliment had been paid – “I never met a more...,” I assumed he meant to say, “friendly, generous.” The spectacle of Okinawan hospitality not only generated amity and sharing, it added to a knowledge of *hakujin* compiled in years of engagements with his male white co-workers, bosses, and many others everyday, a knowledge that could see him return the “racial gaze.” “I

got along real well with most of the *hakujin* people” he said of his work colleagues. “It’s just the different type of, [or] even in that race of people;” he struggled a bit as he tried to explain why working with *hakujin* required careful judgement with each individual encountered. Giving a hypothetical example, he explained, “I [might know] him from the day I moved to Alberta, I don’t associate with him because I know his personality.” Then, moving from the personal to the racial, “That’s the way they are. They have no, in the Japanese, they have no thing called, *ninjō*, compassion” (2011).

Dictionary translations of *ninjō* offer the term “human feelings,” “humanity,” “heart” (Minamide, Nakamura 2011). However, it is also a historically loaded term, which draws off of a cultural genealogy of pivotal ethical meaning. From its early modern articulations in the archetypal Tokugawa moral story of the 47 samurai and especially its Chikamatsu dramatization *Chūshingura* (Takeda, Miyoshi, Namiki 1971, 19) through to postwar popular-cultural nationalist theories of Japanese-ness,<sup>30</sup> *ninjō* – one’s own personal feelings and desires – is set in opposition to obligation or duty (*giri*) to the larger group to which one belongs. In Imperial and wartime Japan, the conflict between what one wants and what one should do could be mobilized to spark a highly affective and aestheticized if very modern, traditional-*istic* form of nationalism.<sup>31</sup> In highlighting the cultural and, in turn, racial difference of *hakujin*, Danny’s invocation of *ninjō* was potent because it shifted our discussion, almost as if moving from one frame of consciousness momentarily to another: conspicuous in the otherwise English exchange of our interview and pointedly exotic as to require a translation, *ninjō* named the *hakujin* as “other” and defined him by what he lacked: it was a moment when a stereotypically Japanese historical-cultural concept activated the Japanese gaze on white men, an “imperial Japanese gaze” potentially to project oneself into and one’s authority onto the working world of men.

There is one more perspective to the “racial gaze.” In the following interview extract, Maddy (2011)<sup>32</sup> – a woman of Okinawan descent born in 1934 – discusses the very low rates of crime and social deviance<sup>33</sup> which help to describe Japanese Canadian assimilation.

Just as part of the general Japanese population, I think that we’ve done very well. I think we all want to be respected, and acted in respectful ways. I’m really proud of the fact, that for our whole population, there are very few, that have had trouble with the law.

When I asked her why this might have been the case, she – like Danny in his description of *hakujin* – shifted from the personal to the racial focussing specifically on a profound contrast in parenting practices:

the *hakujin*’s are saying... ‘you indulge your children and yet they don’t get into trouble;’ they would ask ‘why is that?’ I say, ‘well I think it is because our parents expect us to behave in that way. Well, I mean all parents do, but I think it is an ingrained Japanese thing.’ (2011)

Maddy’s sense of pride in her Japanese heritage and community as passed down through the generations animated her narration of this episode, all the more so because her interview highlighted a special admiration for her mother that seemed to inform her own maternal approach. Moreover, the passion with which she spoke seemed almost to dissolve time, and for that moment as I listened and watched her speak, she inhabited her story less to re-live or revive the facts that made it up – words exchanged, interactions engaged. Rather, this was the

genesis of her story, unfolding its meanings and morals as if for the first time: it was incredibly moving.

If memory – recalling Josellson’s ideas on “autobiographical memory” – potentially can be understood as the instantiation of the past in the present, remembering may be described as a quantum process of bridging time which requires the rememberer simultaneously to occupy positions of now and then. Filtered through everything in between, the senses are directed into and enlivened by the past: hearing, smelling bread and tasting donuts, feeling, and – returning to the racial gaze – looking (back) are re-played at the same time that the spectacle of the past is newly viewed shaping the present now. It can be a moment of supreme empowerment, as Laura Mulvey (1975) posited in her feminist study of how men see and women are seen in and through film: “the man controls the film phantasy and also emerges as the representative of power in a further sense; as the bearer of the look of the spectator” (12) she writes in her seminal essay on the “male gaze” that first gave cultural scholarship the concept of the “gaze.”

Of course, remembering is not the same as viewing a movie, but the filmic positions that Mulvey’s ideas describe are useful. Replace “man” with “Japanese,” and we can begin to see that Maddy’s story illustrates how the “racial gaze” is manifold: she is looked upon as the object of the “white” and “colonial gaze” when the *hakujin* questions her Japanese parenting techniques; in retort, she invokes Japanese tradition, an exotically Oriental ineffability to the *hakujin*’s “white gaze” in the conundrum that is to spare the rod and discipline the child; and the look is reversed so that she now passes moral judgement, the *hakujin* is the “other” to be defined and appraised, known. In that memory moment, she occupies all positions: she is the object of her own “racial gaze,” the drama that she sees as

she recalls is of herself, she is the heroin, the focus of her pride, her own story which is also the moral story of the Japanese community; she is this drama's spectacle and this drama's audience. Borrowing Mulvey's words and weaving through the feminist focus a critical race one:

As the spectator identifies with the main [Japanese] protagonist, she projects her look on to that of her like, her screen surrogate, so that the power of the [Japanese] protagonist as she controls events coincides with the active power of the [moral] look,...giving a satisfying sense of omnipotence.<sup>34</sup>

In other words, self-affirming pride.

### **The End of Assimilation – On (Not) Turning White**

That the drama of Maddie's story emerged through the re-collection of fragments of her past to piece together a parable of self and community in the present, it prompts us to consider how pride, through the mobilization of memory, is itself a historicising process of becoming. Consider the following excerpt from a group interview with the Matsuoka sisters as they discussed the racial climate in early-postwar Lethbridge (Helen, Amy, Grace, Diane, 2016).<sup>35</sup> Here, they explored their memories of the family of a childhood friend of Amy and Grace, two of four siblings born in the early 1940s.

“They wouldn’t admit that they were Japanese” said Amy. With this statement, her whispered ruminations turned audibly to bemusement as the racial and moral implications of her recollections became clear: “They all liked to think of themselves as...” she continued. “So they wanted to be white,” interjected Helen, the eldest. “Oh, yeah, and be considered white” added Grace, sparked by a strong sense of indignation as she remembered one encounter with her friend who, “once said to me:”

...she said ‘Oh, you’re really good looking for a Japanese.’ And, I just cringed; I thought, ‘what are you saying!?’ and there’s a white woman right in front of us, and I just thought, ‘hmm, what a horrible thing to say.’ (2016)

Grace, Amy, and Helen can be seen here to wrangle with the multifarious workings of the “white gaze”. Their exchange and their estimation in particular of Grace’s friend seems to broach what in Azuma’s words is the “search for whiteness,” what Omi described as the desire to “be defined as white or ‘near white’.” Here, the colonial power of the “white gaze” can be seen to be so powerful as to effect racial morphing: her friend and friend’s family assume themselves to be white, adopting the “white gaze” on other Japanese.

On the other hand, this episode’s recollection is constructed around the incongruity of this inter-racial spectacle. In Grace’s eyes, the closer that her friend tries to assume the authority of “whiteness,” going so far as to draw off the racial authenticity of the real white woman next to whom she physically stands, the more her assertion to be “considered white” is *not quite* realized. At the time of the engagement, Grace didn’t voice the umbrage she felt; yet the latent energy generated in that experience was stored to transform this memory into something historically vitalising now. Here, the process of assimilation was profoundly

shaped, where discourses of race configuring the power of imperial histories collided with the fact and feelings of one person's life, an instance in which perception is so acute as to generate identity, not only a Japanese sense of self but the assertion of its integrity.

The conjunctural significance of these moments may itself be an effect of age. The lived moment then which through the act of recollection is the lived moment now, is in fact an on-going assembly, added to as well as altered as the life cycle innovates one's existence over and again. Speaking of her oldest son's primary school years in the mid-1960s, Naoko (2011),<sup>36</sup> an "evacuee," described how she became "quite heavily involved" in parents' attempts to improve the quality of first-grade teaching. Identifying her activity as the first time that she went beyond her own community as a Japanese and a woman, I asked her what it was like. "I don't know why," she replied, gaining force of conviction as she proceeded, "but I felt like I could look at the rest of the community eyeball to eyeball. I never felt any shame about who I was or what I represented. I could speak up at the Bowman's School meeting without any worries." Motivated as a parent to ensure the best prospects for her child, she stepped into the mainstream to engage with others including the highly influential Dorothy Gentleman, Canada's Mother of the Year in 1961 (Lethbridge Historical Society).

Listening back to my conversation with Naoko, it was troubling to me that she described what was an intrepid act of self-assertion with reference to the word "shame." In the broader context of her interview, however, this choice of wording brings into high relief the insults she and her family had suffered: simply being Japanese could bring humiliation; the scorn of the racist "white gaze" asserting and reminding that one was second-rate or lower. At the start of the war, she witnessed her beloved father – "a wonderful man" who "knew off by heart the dialogue of all the *kabuki* plays" – being forced to come to Alberta

simply by dint of his race in order to keep the family together, this despite the fact that he was wholly unsuited to the hardships of farm labour; he really struggled. In the early postwar years, she learnt the harsh reality that her popularity in the Japanese community did not extend to white society: she was not asked to dance even once at her graduation ball; “I was shunned, ostracized” she said as she explained her vow that after that “you couldn’t have paid me a million dollars to date a *hakujin*.” With irony and a self-knowing smile, she referred to her recent marriage to her white husband, “my attitudes have changed quite a bit.” Indeed; in her life, her refusal to feel shame not only set a new trajectory of civic achievement: just a few years later in 1967-68, Naoko became the Area Commissioner of the Lethbridge Scouts, “the first Japanese woman” she emphasized to attain this appointment. Rather, through the narration of her life in retrospect, she negotiated the colonising power of the “white gaze” across her history, commanding it in the public sphere as she – “eyeball to eyeball” – demanded change to institutional practice and policy back then, shaping the “white gaze” decades later as she judged who of which race could share of her intimate life now (Naoko 2011).

While it may have been the case that at the end of the twentieth century the Japanese could be called an “ethnic success story” precisely because they were “the most-assimilated group of all ethnic minorities in Canada,” *nisei* assimilation was far from straight-forward. Rather, as lived experience and memory – on-going, contingent, in flux – it might be something akin to what Min Zhou (1997) might identify as “segmented assimilation.” Engaging the multiculturalist scholarly approach, she suggests that “immigrants actively shape their own lives rather than exist passively as beneficiaries or victims of ‘ineluctable modernizing and Americanizing forces’” (975, 983). Although Zhou isn’t directly concerned with the role of memory in the formation of individual and collective history, her focus on



immigrant children in America highlights the inter-generational transmission of familial and ethnic identity which resonates with the experience of the *nisei* I interviewed. Moreover, Zhou's premise that "individual and structural factors are intertwined" is important because in highlighting individual subjectivity, the macro-historical straight-line teleology of racial assimilation becomes complicated: it is altered by the relationships, engagements, and emotions of everyday life which create productive if conflicting forms of social capital in the form of family and community. To this, as the *nisei* in southern Alberta have revealed, we might add moral capital which emerges through race as a lived experience, whose value is acquired over a lifetime as memory itself evolves. Re-appraised and re-shaped, assimilation itself perhaps changed so that when, at one time, few *nisei* voices at mid-century were heard to extol the value of being Japanese let alone deploy that which this heritage might lend (Camelon 1996), we now hear it to be a constitutive resource to be acknowledged, celebrated even.

## CONCLUSION

In the mid-twentieth century pivot when the trans-Pacific war confirmed the victory of the white race over the yellow, the authority of colonial discourses on race exerted powerful influence to shape the process of de-colonization of Britain's white Canadian Dominion.<sup>35</sup> Even as Canada defined its sovereign post-colonial identity as British influence waned through its evolving if conflicted embrace of multi-culturalism, assimilation and the primacy of whiteness remained vitally imperative. Through the memories and traumas of wartime state violence suffered, the desire "to be defined as white" hardly came to an end as we have

heard in the narration of *nisei* lives and as many other studies have argued. However, the “search for whiteness” reveals how, even as historical and structural pressures seemed inexorably to shape racial identity, race as a discursive construction could be negotiated in often unexpected ways, translated dynamically into affective and moral values of sharing, intimacy, enmity, friendship, shame and pride, and aspiration to name a few. More significantly, race as an everyday experience could be as knowingly deployed as it was also lived through unwittingly. In the many decisions made each day and as the present transformed into stories of the past to be later recollected – itself a shaping of the present and imagination of the future – trajectories of life could and did alter: in the process of becoming, race for many of the *nisei* I spoke with was imbued with strategic significance for one’s life and the wider communities with whom one identified. The post-colonial legacy of whiteness and the enduring authority of the white “racial gaze” is un-deniable: assimilation saw individuals rejected, re-formed, and renamed by others or even more compellingly, willingly by oneself with both culturally violent and individually empowering effects.

For many *nisei* I spoke with approaching the latter years of their life, they judge with understandable satisfaction that assimilation has by and large been completed. Collectively and individually, they have achieved material success or at least comfort and moreover, there is little social alienation: their children were given solid foundations to themselves succeed, and the physiognomic characteristics of the Japanese may just melt away in the generations to follow as Makabe has judged. However, there is at least one more instalment to the assimilation narrative that the oral-history engagement alerts us to. Here we shift our focus away from Canada as Britain’s former white Dominion, to the post-colonial influence of Imperial Japan. In the remembrance of each individual’s life, assimilation was hardly singular and straight-forward: we have encountered conflicted impulses to ascend a racial

hierarchy which saw individual pride measured in terms of racialized values of Japanese civilization and modern enlightenment; and we saw how an individual's life might split into bifurcated trajectories. Nor did assimilation mean a complete "whitewashing," far from it since in the southern-Alberta postwar experience that the narrators narrated, assimilation was also about *not* becoming white; it was a discovery of what it means to be Japanese.

Which brings us finally back to Esther. Where at one time being Japanese sparked feelings of inferiority, it was also a "buffer" (Zhou 1997, 997) one that would eventually shape the course of her life: "Until I really connected with some of my Japanese friends, yes, I think I, sort of, wished I was white" (Esther 2017). There is a subtle but crucial pivot in Esther's story here. Meaningful contact with other Japanese, including most importantly her future husband, this didn't simply generate security through familiarity, though that was certainly important. Rather, it opened opportunities to explore the inheritance bequeathed by her parents, for example, through trips to Japan which animated strong emotional ties of family and morality, valuing the lack of crime there which chimes with low levels of social deviance amongst Japanese Canadians, including the generation of her children. She has actively embraced Japanese culture: she is learning to cook her mother's recipes which she teaches her son; she practices Japanese dance which she shares with her daughter. These aren't simply hobbies to pass the time, since in the embrace of culture, she herself knowingly becomes a critical point of inter-generational transmission of racial identity, and in turn, individual and collective memory that to Esther affirms the aspirations animating her past as a Japanese woman as it also shapes the Japanese-influenced Canadian future:

Because, I think it's important that you keep some of that, you know, Japanese interest in whatever, whether it be dancing, or cooking, or just coming to church

once in a while, yes, I think it's important...I hope they would take a little bit more interest, you know, in their Japanese heritage, and maybe to pass some of it on to, like, [my son] and his two boys.

Across the story of her life, Esther's navigation of assimilation through the postwar decades and beyond is a story of personal becoming whose effects also mirror the transformation of community in southern Alberta of which the Japanese form an important part. Where once she felt such insecurity as to want to become white, her "search for whiteness" is now configured as an assertion of her Japanese-ness, a validation of all her efforts and the story of from where she has come to where she has now arrived:

yes, I think people should be proud that they're Japanese, on the whole most people really respect the Japanese community

When I asked her if she felt proud, she beamed: "very, very proud to be Japanese, yes" (Esther 2017).

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## NOTES

1. Pseudonym.
2. Thirty-eight participated in individual interviews, thirteen participated as couples or a focus group.
3. As with other communities that emerged as a result of Japanese wartime forced displacements – Winnipeg (Loewen and Friesen 2009, 151-155), farming communities in southern Ontario (Bangarth 2005), Toronto and Hamilton (Dowe 2007), Montreal (Oiwa 1986) – southern Alberta's was highly artificial in the immigration histories and origins, social and economic backgrounds, and migration compositions (for example, groups of men to southern Ontario, able-bodied work units to southern Alberta) of its Japanese. In one significant way, however, the postwar evolution of southern Alberta was distinctive because it was home to an established set of communities dating back to early-twentieth century. Taking advantage of the relatively late settlement process of the province's arable hinterland, their embeddedness in the society that evolved is part of a wider trans-continental history of the diasporic Japanese presence emerging and enduring across the century on either side of North America's continental divide, for example: Kelowna (Roy 1990), Denver, Colorado (Maeda 2008). To be certain, the strategic "structure of dispersal" in order to remain invisible that Oiwa (1986) observed of the late 1940s and early 1950s in Montreal has some resonance with the effects of the geographical dispersion of southern Alberta as a result of the area's agricultural economy. Yet, "self-marginalization" (20) is not wholly germane when trying to explain how in this

“contact zone,” a “Japan town” of sorts emerged to shape – literally – geographical space and colour inter-racial engagement at its most fundamental levels. These stories are beyond the scope of this essay. It is sufficient to note, however, that the southern-Alberta “contact zone” – “social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations” (Platt 1992, 4) – which the Japanese created and inhabited significantly framed the experience of assimilation on either side of the mid-century rupture.

4. A number fall outside of the conventional age range of *nisei* nationally which has been identified as having been born between 1910-1935 (Kage, 2008, 169).
5. “First generation;” original immigrants from Japan.
6. “Third generation;” children of *nisei*.
7. Of note, southern Alberta’s communities were characterised by pronounced ethnic difference with the Hardieville community emerging from the Okinawan diaspora (Fujioka 2010; see also, Nakasone 2002).
8. See also Myszal (2003).
9. The inter-generational transmission of Japanese cultural values from *issei* to *nisei* is cited early on in the discursive production of Japanese-Canadian history. See, for example, Chapter 15 of *The Enemy that Never Was* (Adachi 1976). That this could be the source of inter-generational conflict is critically demonstrated by Camelon (1994).

10. Wartime measures that were implemented in response to populist “politics of racism” were extended to 1949 under the guise of national security (Sunahara 1981).
11. For example, see Milton Gordon on structural assimilation and H.J. Gans on “straight-line” assimilation, “a process unfolding in sequence of generational steps; each new generation represents on average a new stage of adjustment to the host society” (cited in Alba and Nee 1997, 830-833). See also, Lisa J. Neidert and Farley Reynolds (1985), Josh DeWind and Philip Kasinitiz (1997), and Monica Boyd and Elizabeth M. Grieco, (1998).
12. Pseudonym.
13. Pseudonym.
14. Stuart Hall (1997) defines the “Spectacle of the ‘Other’” with reference to race as “the repertoires of representation and representational practices which...mark racial difference” (239).
15. Pseudonym. See also, David Iwaasa (2005) on early twentieth-century southern-Alberta Japanese (8-9).
16. Pseudonym.
17. See also, John Howard (2001).



18. Popular understandings of Alberta's Indigenous communities were influenced by a mode of representation that emphasised extreme disadvantage. Well into the 1980s, for example, Smith (1985) cited "the worst unemployment and living conditions experienced by any group in the province," including a ninety per-cent jobless rate, fatal levels of alcoholism, and a prevalence of tuberculosis sixteen times higher than the provincial average (76, 78, 79, 81).
19. Pseudonym.
20. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper, the situation of Alberta's Indigenous groups can be understood as a long-term Anglo-imperial inter-Dominion project of colonization involving forms of mass dispossession resulting in reserves and apartheid, cultural genocide, socio-economic cultures of poverty, and sexual abuse. See, for example, John S. Saul (2010); on "white settler society", Razack (2002).
21. Group Interview, pseudonyms.
22. A contrast is potentially suggested when considering my interviews with people who immigrated to Canada after the war. Instead of *hakujin* when referring to the white mainstream, they would use "white" or "Canadian."
23. Pseudonym.

24. Mary was one of some 4,000 individuals who were “voluntarily” deported to Japan from 1946-1947. Mis-represented by the Canadian government and executed as a *de facto* test of loyalty, this forced deportation was highly controversial. For Mary’s family, the move was a fateful one, filled with hardships of being rejected and discriminated against by the Japanese, themselves struggling to survive wartime destruction and poverty. Following her return to Canada, fifteen years passed before Mary would see her parents again. See, for example, Tatsuo Kage (2012).
25. Pseudonym.
26. The generation of Mary’s and Faith’s parents.
27. Group Interview, pseudonyms.
28. Even as the British Empire withdrew, it can be argued that the legacy of its “imperial gaze” as the regulation of space and race – of which the “Evacuation” of the Japanese was a supreme achievement – was active in the settling province of Alberta after the Second World War. See footnote 35.
29. Pseudonym.
30. See, for example, Doi Takeo (1967).
31. See, for example, Sharalyn Orbaugh’s discussion (2007, 261-271) on the “narrative paradigm” in popular culture of the Japanese mother whose duty (*giri*) it is to send her

son off to war for the sake of the nation, battling to control her own desires to keep him safe (*ninjō*).

32. Pseudonym.
33. See, for example, Tamara K. Nopper (2015, 211-217).
34. The original reads: “As the spectator identifies with the main male protagonist, he projects his look on to that of his like, his screen surrogate, so that the power of the male protagonist as he controls events coincides with the active power of the erotic look, both giving a satisfying sense of omnipotence” (Mulvey 1975, 12).
35. Group interview, pseudonyms.
36. Pseudonym.
35. Britain’s Canadian “white dominion...remained part of the British imperial system, bound by a web of cultural, defense, and economic ties” well into the 1940s and 1950s (Stockwell 2008, 272). As part of a “racial community of Britons” that between 1815 and 1930 attracted some 2.3 million migrants to Canada (Thompson 2008, 49), the scale of Britons’ colonial migrations helped to “confirm the British character of Anglo-Canadian society” (Palmer 1985, 29-30), one that enforced a definition of “Britishness” as a form of civic nationalism (Buckner and Bridge 2003, 82). On the decolonization of the “white dominions,” see: Darwin (2009); Hopkins (2008); and,

with reference to the impact on the status of French Canada *vis-à-vis* Anglo-Canada,  
see Mackay (2002).

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